6 Ways to Market to Nontraditional Students in 2023
The pandemic has dealt a heavy blow to the higher education sector. College enrollments have been on the decline for the past few years, and the pandemic has only made things worse. Attracting students to higher ed programs is a major challenge, and enrollment marketing strategies must evolve.

**Today’s Enrollment Challenges**

There are many challenges faced by both nontraditional students and schools regarding enrollment. One of the most significant barriers is the cost of degrees. As tuition rates increase along with other associated expenses like textbooks, computers, and study materials, fewer people can afford to attend college. This is especially true for private colleges and universities.

Another obstacle that schools face is the shift toward skills-based hiring. As the economy continues to change, many career paths allow students to learn required skills without a traditional four-year degree and employers are relaxing their education requirements and providing on-the-job training. Furthermore, in a candidate-driven job market with an abundance of opportunities, there is less urgency to pursue education for the sake of career progression.

Finally, the proliferation of online certifications and other remote academic offerings also impacts enrollment numbers. With more and more people choosing to forgo brick-and-mortar schools, the pool of potential students for colleges and universities is shrinking.

**Today’s Nontraditional Students**

Nontraditional students are defined as those who don't fit the typical student profile. They may be older, working full-time, have a family, or be active duty military or veterans. They often have some college experience, but may not have completed a degree. Others may be seeking to complete graduate studies to further their careers.

These students may have different motivations for pursuing their degree, but they all share a common goal: to improve their career prospects and earn a higher salary.
Create Personas to Guide You

Before launching any marketing campaigns, you need a solid understanding of the student personas you want to reach. Personas are fictional characters you create to represent specific audiences. What are their main motivations for advancing their education? Where do they seek information? How do they prefer to communicate? How urgently do they want to pursue an educational program? Knowing the answers to these questions and others – through interviews or other forms of research – will help you craft truly student-centric marketing materials (more on that next).

Use Solutions-Based Marketing Materials

Your marketing messages should speak directly to the needs of nontraditional students and offer solutions to their challenges. Use language that resonates with them and highlight the benefits of your school that are most relevant to their lives, such as flexible class schedules, synchronous and asynchronous online learning programs, options to earn microcredentials, childcare, transportation assistance, and support services for students with families. Remember to make them – and not your school – the focus of your message.

Emphasize Flexibility

One proven way to market to nontraditional students is to promote your flexible program options: classes you offer online, in the evenings, or on weekends. This approach could also include highlighting microcredentials as well as accelerated programs that allow students to complete their degrees in a shorter amount of time. Nontraditional students often have busy schedules, so offering and promoting flexibility can make it easier for them to pursue their education.

Additionally, promote flexibility in your payment options. Nontraditional students may not be able to pay for their education in one lump sum, or they may require financial assistance. To emphasize your school's affordability, provide clear information on flexible payment plans, financing options, financial aid, and/or scholarships.
Be Mindful of Emotional Impacts

Unlike recent high school grads seeking the excitement of a traditional four-year college experience, nontraditional students may bring negative emotions to the decision-making process such as shame around attempting to reenter a degree program and anxiety about how they’ll balance school with work and life responsibilities. It may take more or different touchpoints (calls, texts, emails, events, etc.) to engage cautious nontraditional learners.

Highlight Career Opportunities & Outcomes

Many nontraditional students are looking to improve their career prospects or switch to a new career altogether, and understanding what the return on their investment will be is critical. Emphasize the job placement rate for your school’s graduates, highlight mutually beneficial partnerships with employers, showcase successful alumni, and provide information on career counseling services.

Connect With Local Organizations

There are likely organizations in your community that work with nontraditional students. Connecting with these organizations is a great way to reach potential students on a more personal level and establish credibility. You can partner with these organizations to host events and promote your school, as well as get insight from them on what their members are looking for in an educational program.

About iHire

Since 1999, iHire has attracted job seekers across 50+ industries who are ready to grow in their careers and receptive to investing in their education. How? Our exceptional candidate experience puts them first, and our industry-specific approach helps them reach their job search goals faster.

Connect with us to find out how we can work together to increase student enrollment for your institution.

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